

*Iowa Civil Rights Commission –
Presentation before Justice Systems Appropriations Sub-Committee. 1-26-07*

Restore lost funding for the Iowa Civil Rights Commission (ICRC). The agency's request is for an increase of \$250,000 in state appropriations. Our state appropriations have regressed, having "returned" to the same level as 16 years ago (1991). Compared to 2001, ICRC has nearly 40% fewer full-time staff. The Commission is operating at its lowest staffing level in 20 years. State and federal reductions have compromised the ability of the agency to deliver on its mission to receive and fairly investigate claims of discrimination. In 2006, progress was made in restoration of a portion of the cuts from the early 2000's.

- Iowa needs to be a state known for its welcome, safe environment for diverse populations. Without this system of justice, Iowa would lose the potential for contributions from all members of society and lose the image as a welcoming, safe state, ready for a diverse, future Iowa. Civil rights enforcement helps insure society receives full benefits from a diverse, creative workforce.

ICRC combines regulatory resolution of discrimination complaints, with education and training programs to further voluntary compliance. ICRC helps create fair, non-discriminatory opportunities for all Iowans in the areas of employment, housing, public accommodations, credit, and education.

To achieve these goals, ICRC provides:

- 1) Enforcement of state laws through screening, mediation, investigation, conciliation and hearings; and
- 2) Training and education of stakeholder groups and business and industry.

In partnership with local commissions, ICRC works to prevent and resolve discrimination based on age, disability, sex, race, national origin, and family or marital status. We provide cost effective investigatory processes that resolve discrimination complaints. Complainants can file with or without an attorney; there are no costs for filing. To prevent discrimination (and complaints from being filed in the first place), ICRC offers training and education for the private and public sectors and stakeholder groups.

- **Funding request** To help restore its budget and service levels, to meet escalating federal requirements, but declining federal dollars, and respond to increasing numbers of stakeholder groups, ICRC is asking for an increase of \$250,000 to fill 4.5 vacancies (\$220,500) and for IT upgrades (\$24,500).
 - In **1991**, state funding was \$1,030,933; funding rose to \$1,223,000 in FY00 and is at \$1,076,000 for current FY 07 – not factoring in inflation. In addition to state cuts, projected declines in federal funds for FY07 may mean an additional loss of \$200,000 – the final figure is unknown, since contracts have yet to be finalized. If funds are not restored, backlogs will increase. Reductions over the past decade have undercut our ability to receive and investigate claims of discrimination.

Contracts with local agencies and restructuring of systems and staff have managed to stabilize case backlog on a temporary basis. Continued underfunding will undermine these efforts. Additional funding will restore some of the past cuts, replace a portion of lost federal funding, and upgrade data collection and reporting.

- Additional funding will further strengthen our successful mediation program. Mediation reduces high costs of litigation and case backlogs. By providing free, neutral resolution services in disputes, the interests of all parties (both complainants and respondents) are served. Over the past three fiscal years (June 1, 2003 to July 30, 2006) the Iowa Civil Rights Commission resolved over 700 cases through settlements, mediation, and conciliation. Individual settlements ranged from a letter of apology to \$346,000. Mediation alone resulted in total settlements to Iowans in excess of \$1,350,000 during this period of time.
- Funding will allow for restoring at least three positions and upgrading equipment to 21st century technology. Modern IT equipment will support digital recording and storage of investigatory interviews and provide for greater efficiency and accountability.

Cost savings. -- To parties on both sides of our process, we resolve allegations and complaints of discrimination, involving the public and private sectors, in rural and urban Iowa. Compared to the out-of-pocket costs of tens of thousands of dollars per court case, we offer a cost efficient system for complainant and the business, employer, or landlord respondents.

Working towards the future. --An effective discrimination enforcement agency helps Iowa increase the pool of qualified workers, insuring Iowa receives as broad based economic contributions as possible from all sectors of society. To attract and sustain a pool of highly skilled workers, our agency assists in educating, training and recruiting a culturally competent workforce. Our agency educates business and industry on discrimination laws and diversity issues to prevent problems and provide a more welcoming economic climate.

Efforts to save resources. -

- To save resources, over the past two years, ICRC instituted layoffs and furloughs (impacting over 25% of the staff).
- In 2006, following 2005 statutory changes, ICRC implemented administrative changes to reduce paperwork and mailing requirements.
- Last year, ICRC entered into contracts with the Department of Public Health to meet staffing needs.
- To stretch resources, ICRC partners with local commissions across the state through 12 sub-contracts.
- ICRC utilized grants, including pooled technology funds and use of IowaAccess assistance.
- ICRC uses interns from Drake Law School to assist in preliminary screening and mediation.
- Recently, ICRC entered into an innovative contract with a private, not for profit (Iowa Legal Aid) to assist in intake (filtering out non meritorious cases, while assisting in filing of cases that may have merit) and alternative dispute resolution (using volunteer attorneys to mediate cases, prior to any public hearing or court action).
- ICRC successfully received a VISTA grant to assist in building the capacity of local communities' efforts in the areas of diversity and fighting discrimination.
- These latter two efforts may be unique in this country.

Federal funding and mandates. - The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) require ICRC to investigate and resolve discrimination in housing and employment.

Our federal contracts are in jeopardy if we are unable to process a certain number of cases (and in an acceptable fashion). Reasonable staffing levels are critical for conducting adequate case investigation and for drawing down federal dollars.

Increasing the credibility and integrity of the civil rights enforcement process, responding to requests for training from stakeholder groups and business and industry, and quickly and fairly resolving complaints, all will strengthen the image of Iowa as a welcoming community. In Iowa, “our rights we maintain”; doing so helps keep Iowans free from the loss of dignity, humanity and economic damage caused by discrimination.

Iowans want to send a positive message regarding the value we place on diversity and inclusivity. By fairly enforcing civil rights laws, we can help create safe, diverse, attractive and inclusive communities, free from discrimination based on age, disability, sex, race, color, or family status.

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